DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 331 SP 030 971

TITLE	America's Education Success Story at a Crossroads: The National Diffusion Network in 1989. A Concept Review.
INSTITUTION	National Dissemination Study Group.
PUB DATE	17 Feb 89
NOTE	11p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Delivery Systems; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Aid; *Needs Assessment; *Politics of Education; *Program Development; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*National Diffusion Network

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the current status and problems of the National Diffusion Network (NDN), a federally funded endeavor established to enable developers of educational programs to provide evidence that their programs improve student outcomes; and to disseminate their programs nationwide through a network of state facilitators. The study discusses six major problem areas: (1) inadequate federal support; (2) the weakening influx of a variety of strong, new developer demonstrator projects into the NDN; (3) issues relating to the composition and approach of the Program Effectiveness Panel, which validates applicant programs; (4) difficulties surrounding the evaluation of the impact of the system's projects, (5) undue political influence in the funding of NDN programs; and (6) the need for redefinition of NDN projects. The NDN must adapt to its environment on the federal level and in the individual classrooms of America. (JD)

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America's Education Success Story at a Crossroads:

the National Diffusion Network in 1989

A concept review,
prepared by the National Dissemination Study Group

Preface

On the occasion of the National Diffusion Network's 15th birthday, it is appropriate for the professional association that represents the men and women who direct and staff NDN projects to reflect on the success of this extraordinary system -- one which brings "educational programs that work" to tens of thousands of American schools each year. Such reflection requires an honest examination of problems confronting the NDN, as well as alternative solutions to those problems.

This short paper is intended to do just that -- or, rather, to start the processes of assessment and problem solving. The paper is neither comprehensive nor final. It represents what we hope will be a catalyst for our members, the staff and leadership of the Education Department's Office of Educational Research & Improvement, members of Congress and staff, and other interested participants in American educational policy making and program enactment to define and resolve what obstacles exist to the NDN becoming even more successful in its second 15 years.

We note a variety of alternative solutions for most of the problem areas described. None of these lists of alternatives is exhaustive, nor does their inclusion imply an official endorsement of, or formal recommendation by, the NDSG except in those instances specifically designated.

Nearly a dozen people participated in the development and refinement of the version of the concept paper you now hold, and I am appreciative of each person's assistance. I particularly want to thank John Hollifield, of Johns Hopkins University, without whose exceptional initial draft we would still be thinking about a paper rather than producing one, as well as several members of the NDSG Board of Directors and Stu Horsfall, of Sopris West, Inc., all of whom did considerable thinking and editing work on their own time. No attempt at forging consensus among this group of reviewers was attempted by me, the paper's most recent editor, and it is possible that some or all of those who have seen earlier drafts of the paper will disagree with elements of this version, printed in time for the NDN-NDSG festivities in Washington, February 21-24.

The next step is yours, dear Reader. Please read, consider, criticize, endorse, suggest, revise -- but take initiative: join with us actively in the process of helping to improve a system that former ED Secretary Bell once called "the best example" in education of the "federal government doing what it best can do" -- the NDN.

D. Max McConkey
NDSG Executive Director

17 February 1989

This paper was prepared in January and February 1989 by the

National Dissemination Study Group

a non-profit association representing the professionals who conduct the National Diffusion Network projects throughout the country.

The paper does not necessarily represent the views of all members of the association.

No federal monies were used in the paper's development or dissemination.

For more information about the NDSG write:
NDSG, 290 S. Main St., Andover, MA 01810, or call (508) 470-1080

Background

The National Diffusion Network was created in 1974 to accomplish a specific purpose in a specific way -- to help schools and districts nationwide use effective education products and processes to improve student learning.

This complex task is accomplished through a system in which the developers of educational programs -- most of them classroom teachers -- first provide convincing evidence that their programs improve student outcomes, then disseminate their programs nationwide through a network of State Facilitators -- key individuals in each state who work with schools and districts to identify their needs and to help them select the effective programs that meet those needs. Once a program is selected, the developer of that program -- called a Developer Demonstrator -- provides the school or district with the awareness, training, and technical assistance necessary for the school or district to implement the program.

Central to the NDN's mission is the belief that teachers often learn best from other teachers. For 15 years the network has demonstrated that exemplary, locally-developed programs can be transferred and do produce remarkable improvements in the classrooms and schools where they are adopted. This teacher-to-teacher transmission of success is at the very heart of the National Diffusion Network's mission and its implementation is largely responsible for the NDN's incredible achievements.

The NDN has proven to be an exceptionally successful federal system for the dissemination of exemplary school practices and is so recognized by practitioners, state education agencies, the U.S. Education Department, and the United States Congress. Working since 1980 with an average appropriation of only $10-million per year, the people in the NDN have provided training for approximately 60,000 U.S. teachers each year, helping to improve the learning of about 2,500,000 students annually.

Each day the NDN provides training to help teachers adopt programs in reading, writing, math, science, and other instruction, as well as in programs that improve student attitudes toward school, prevent dropouts, and accomplish a wide variety of other vital education objectives. Significantly, National Diffusion Network training and follow-up assistance involves only educational products and processes that have produced substantial evidence that they are effective. The NDN is truly a system for sharing educational programs that work.

Reason for Success

The reasons for the success of the NDN lie in two areas: its people and its process. NDN *people* are educational leaders, looking to the federal government only for very basic support -- a small State Facilitator or Developer Demonstrator grant upon which they are able to launch individual enterprises to improve American schools.

The NDN *process* is unique, comparable in organization and impact with only one other significant improvement effort in American history -- the agricultural extension program, which made American farming the envy of the rest of the world. (In the NDN adaptation of the agricultural extension model, there are two kinds of "agents," state-based facilitators *and* other teachers -- the latter the developers of the successful innovation being disseminated.)

And the NDN is uniquely American in that it is a system providing a full range of quality, locally-developed educational program options -- choices. Schools and districts, provided with information about the range of NDN projects, choose those that are likely to meet their individual needs.

At the Crossroads

The NDN is a viable, successful, efficient, truly American program of school improvement. But in its 15th year, the NDN faces a number of problems -- external and internal -- that must be resolved if its next 15 years are to be as successful or even more successful.

These problems include:
- inadequate federal support;
- the weakened influx of a variety of strong, new DD projects into the NDN;
- issues relating to the composition and approach of the Program Effectiveness Panel, which validates applicant programs;
- a need for new ways to assess the impact of NDN projects;
- undue political influence in the funding of NDN programs; and,
- the need for redefinition of NDN projects.

Adequate Funding

Since 1980 the NDN has received nearly level-funding at about $10,000,000 per year, increased to its authorization floor of just over $11-million for FY89. Unfortunately, "level funding" over a ten-year period is not truly level funding -- it is a decrease equal to the sum of cumulative inflation. The NDN, often called one of the most successful federal education programs ever created, has, in effect, received funding cuts nearly every year since 1977. (It received $14-million in a single year, 1979, by far the highest NDN appropriation before or since.)

"Level funding" through the past ten years is actually funding cut by 67 percent. A Developer Demonstrator project funded by the United States Education Department at a level of $50,000/year in 1980 and "level-funded" since then is actually working with a real dollar budget of $16,667 in 1989. A State Facilitator project funded in 1980 at a level of $100,000 is working essentially with a base grant of $33,333 today. The size of the base NDN grants from ED in 1988-89 has become a problem so acute for DD and SF projects that the problem threatens the very survival of this exceptional national program.

Ironically, the current funding inadequacies are especially burdensome for many of the Developer Demonstrators whose program offerings are in most demand by U.S. schools. Supply simply can no longer meet demand. School systems that want certain NDN programs often cannot get them because the DD does not have the resources that make training possible. Most SFs have, over time, been forced to cut staff and services and, as a result, are now unable to respond properly to the educational needs of the schools in their states.

In the face of decreased federal support, SFs and DDs have achieved some continued success by adopting multiple entrepreneurial activities. And these activities will continue; DDs and SFs have not asked for full support of their respective operations by the federal government, only base support that provides the viability for their efforts per the initial design of the NDN. In fact, individual projects' entrepreneurial successes have come at a cost -- often that cost is a considerable diversion of staff effort away from direct assistance to schools and toward the pursuit of such state, local, and private support as will enable the DD or SF project to stay afloat.

On behalf of its membership, the National Dissemination Study Group, a non-profit educational professional association made up of the people who serve in these NDN projects, will ask Congress for appropriations that would escalate incrementally each year so as to reach, by the mid-'90s, a level of support that will enable the system to run at the capacity for which it was designed and at which it has been unable to operate for over a decade.

Further, we ask the administration to manage a grants program that provides the necessary base of support for NDN SF and DD projects. Attempting to divide inadequate, total NDN resources by reducing the number of Developer Demonstrator projects produces a solution that severs arteries essential to the system's survival. Alternative solutions, including cuts to program functions peripheral to the central NDN operation, must be sought and pursued.

Continuing Effective Projects

The problem of a decreasing influx of a wide variety of new, effective projects into the NDN would be partially addressed by adequate funding for the system. The small size of current ED grants to Developer Demonstrators clearly is not an attractive incentive for school systems, universities, or other agencies to provide the up-front financial commitment and staff necessary to have their program validated and supported by the NDN. The availability of DD grants was once a powerful incentive, drawing developers into the NDN, and it could be again if the size of those grants were sufficient to provide base support once a project is involved in activities of national dissemination.

But increased funding for the NDN is not the entire answer to this problem. Fewer effective projects are available for inclusion in the system simply because federal and state support for *development*, which reached an apex during the Title III and IV-C days of the 1970s, has been significantly scaled back in the 1980s.

There is an additional concern often expressed in the NDN community that a recent over-preoccupation with academically rigorous assessment of applicant projects by ED's Program Effectiveness Panel has excluded some excellent, practical, "real-world," school-based programs. Making the PEP process less cumbersome and, therefore, more attractive to potential new projects *[see next section]* represents one possible remedy. Several observers believe that SFs, some understandably struggling for their very survival, need to do more to reach and encourage potential DDs in their states. With additional support, State Facilitators might accept "identification of new projects" as a formal part of their NDN role.

Other alternative solutions to this problem include: • incorporating state-validated projects into the NDN (which could be accomplished with no loss of excellence in project or system quality, but would also likely require modifications of current PEP procedures); • improving relationships on the federal level between the NDN and other education programs (both within and outside of OERI and of ED, itself), which represent sources for new projects; and, • dramatically increasing the level of promotion and visibility of the NDN (despite its success, too few sources of new programming within the larger education community are aware of the network).

The Program Effectiveness Panel

The certification of effectiveness based on convincing evidence provided by this federal Panel is critical to the credibility of the NDN. The issue concerning the application of certain validation assessment criteria by the Program Effectiveness Panel, cited above, is part of an overall NDN community concern about the intent and procedures of the Panel. This is a concern that will no doubt remain whatever structural changes might occur to the Panel in this new administration, simply because the Panel, as the gateway to NDN participation, is likely to be pulled always in different directions by members with different agendas.

Whatever changes might occur in the Panel and its procedures, the basic concept underlying program validation should remain: the PEP must approve projects based on *evidence of effectiveness*. Approval by the Panel is itself a certification that a project is effective in improving student learning based on clear evidence. At the same time, Panelists should be urged to view each program submission holistically – that is, abandoning its current "forced" scoring points system in favor of one that weighs, also, the need for the project and its real-world/classroom practicability.

Other alternative directions for addressing an array of PEP-related concerns include:

- reexamining an appropriate composition of membership on the Panel;
- the use of a cadre of fewer, well trained Panel members who understand the realities of U.S. school classrooms, and,
- abandonment of the current mail review process, which is artificial, too expensive (requiring a separate technical assistance contract), and which takes too long.

Evaluation of Impact

As the NDN enters its 15th year of successful operation, solutions need to be found to the problems surrounding the evaluation of *impact* of the system's projects. Traditionally, each Developer Demonstrator has been given responsibility by ED for providing evaluation impact data, either from studies conducted by the DD or from assessments made by adopting schools and districts. The evaluation albatross that these procedures produce for DDs should be modified: the projects do not have the time, the money, or the expertise to carry out large scale effective impact evaluations, and they have found that it is not realistic to depend upon school districts, with limited resources, to carry them out, either.

The evaluation requirements currently placed on DDs by the funding agency are part of a large set of expectations that Developer Demonstrators live under. Most projects find that there is currently no way to accomplish all the work that they are required to do. Like inadequate funding, the imposition of unrealistic expectations by ED on DDs acts as a disincentive, particularly to local school districts who have the potential for applying to become new NDN projects.

Suggestions for alleviating these problems have ranged from providing thorough technical assistance in assessment to DDs to having all NDN evaluations conducted by a third-party. Helping DDs is a halfway measure -- it does not address the issues of limited time and finance. However, if this approach is continued, it is suggested that technical assistance be provided *on an individual basis* to DDs entering their second year of the grant cycle.

Third-party evaluations might be more effective; they would take the job completely out of the hands of the DD, who would need only provide necessary information. Third-party assessments, conducted by accomplished evaluators, would also maintain and enhance the integrity and credibility of the NDN by producing methodologically-appropriate evaluations by an outside contractor -- ones that show actual impact on student achievement of various NDN programs.

One suggestion for an interim solution to the DD impact assessment problem is for the ED to contract for the conduct of a modest effort that would select at random -- according to subject area, Congressional district, or other rational means -- a sample of NDN projects to be evaluated. If the sampling were done well, results could reasonably be projected to the rest of the DD population.

Political Influences

In the 15-year history of the NDN, political pressures from within the Education Department have occasionally been brought to bear directly on decisions regarding the funding of specific programs. To some extent, such occurrences are a natural consequence of ED being part of a political system -- the party in power will -- and should -- make funding decisions in light of the principles espoused which brought them to power through the electoral process. Political appointees making grant awards using a process that is less-than-totally objective and a rationale that is ideologically-skewed is not a situation unique to the NDN or to the Department of Education.

The use of political influence, however, should be regulated by careful adherence to the results of fair, equitable, grant review and decision-making processes -- ones already technically in place though, unfortunately, not always followed. Without adherence to a reasonable, publically-announced set of procedures, grant decisions can be made -- or appear to be made -- by closeted, political appointees applying a generally unknown set of criteria, and such processes have been demonstrated to end up being reviewed in the hearing rooms of Congress and by the news media.

Inadequate federal support for education, too, has affected the generation of political pressure. When education funds have been especially scarce, one of the few avenues open to ED officials, naturally desirous to advance their own agenda, is to try to use funds already committed elsewhere. The relatively recent (1987) authorization of the NDN once appeared as a protection to the program, but peculiar, politically-influenced funding pattern episodes since that time suggest that an adequately funded Education Department might better help make the NDN less susceptible to political pressures.

Observers (among them civil servants, Congressional staff, and members of the NDSG professional community) of the grant-making procedures in administrations dating back nearly 30 years agree that there is no simple solution to this set of problems. As a federally-derived and supported system, the NDN, like other grant programs, is a creature of the political system, and it has benefited as well as suffered as a consequence of this reality.

Maintaining the kind of integrity that produces public confidence in an educational program that is designed to improve the nation's schools, however, produces a special burden on those charged with administering the system -- both bureaucrats and political appointees. The discharge of that responsibility should include:

- announcing, in advance, both the criteria used for assessment of grant applications and, in the case of DD applicants, the content categories which will be given priority;
- the use of qualified, demonstrably non ideologically-rigid, peer reviewers;
- pious adherence by those professionals, as well as by ED (internal) reviewers, to the announced evaluation criteria;
- strict rating and ranking of applications based on the completed reviews; and,
- funding of projects consistent with their ratings and rankings.

Defining NDN Projects

Many members of the NDN community believe that the definition of projects appropriate for inclusion within the system is a looming issue that has the potential for creating major network problems. The definition of effective programs was less complex in the early NDN days because virtually all entering programs -- many of them former ESEA Title III or Title I projects -- were teacher-developed, classroom instructional innovations, each typically addressing one major curriculum area. Thus, nearly all Developer Demonstrator programs were easily transportable and replicable.

The NDN's professional community, cognizant of both the depletion of easily-discoverable, newly-developed programs *[see "Continuing Effective Projects," above]* and of the escalating need for

more solutions to increasingly complex school problems, recognizes and supports an expansion of the NDN program base. However, it cautiously awaits a thorough assessment of the impact of "Dissemination Process" projects, a new category of projects introduced within the past two years by ED officials as part of their effort to extend the definition of an NDN demonstration program.

As defined both rhetorically and by example, Dissemination Process efforts can be complex programs, some comprehensive school-system-wide innovations, others research or foundation-developed, all recipients of ED grants several times the size of those provided to fund DDs. The evidence of the success of Dissemination Process projects is still to be measured, and the NDSG has urged ED to conduct a thorough assessment of the utility and impact of this new category of programs on the network. Until that evaluation is complete, the association has formally requested a suspension of funding for new DPs, with scare available NDN program resources being retargeted toward expansion of the Developer Demonstrator pool.

Conclusion

The NDN should, indeed must, change. It is a dynamic, human-driven organism that must adapt to its environment -- both on the federal level and in the individual classrooms of America. The network's professional community is supportive of change, but only change consistent with the basic National Diffusion Network mission. While other state and federal educational dissemination programs have come and gone, the NDN has not only survived through 15, sometimes tumultuous, years, but has succeeded beyond even the high expectations of its creators.

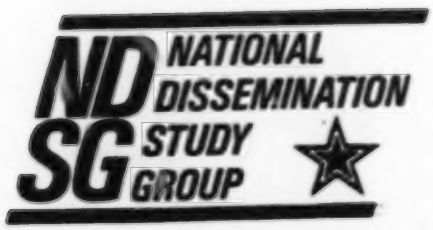
There are reasonably simple explanations for that success: • classroom-developed programs that are proven to be exemplary are enthusiastically welcome by teachers in classrooms elsewhere, and •state-based agencies that know the schools in their territory are best able to facilitate the exchange between those local schools and the available, model demonstration projects. Improvement of the system that does no damage to the basic ingredients of this successful model will be greeted with enthusiasm.

Specifically, the inclusion of demonstration projects in different forms will be embraced -- if they share the NDN's goals and are consistent with the classic NDN paradigm, the model that works. The NDN professional community has a history of welcoming growth, and it endorses network expansion now, but the network's structure is in danger of being torn by efforts to extend program features beyond their means and into areas that are incompatible with the basic form, the standard that has made this very system exemplary.

Summary

While this short paper examines a number of facets of the current NDN, it can be succinctly summarized. The National Diffusion Network is one of the most successful enterprises ever devised and supported by the federal government. An extraordinarily successful program for the dissemination of projects that improve schools, the NDN has demonstrated an impact that is being threatened by a variety of conditions, most especially the inadequacy of its current level of funding.

Should NDN funding remain at levels approximate to that which it has received in recent years, it will be less and less able to respond to the needs of America's schools for effective educational programs. Additionally, some organizational concerns related to the design and conduct of the NDN by the Education Department need attention so as to insure that the NDN remains viable and true to the mission that produced this remarkable national success story.



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